



Never Been to Spain

The Journals & Journeys of Paul

"Lecturer of Arabia"

We last saw Saul, whom we'll now start calling by his Roman name, Paul, being water baptized by Ananias after having been saved and baptized with the Holy Spirit in Damascus.

The exact order of events after his baptism are not as clear as we'd like. What we know for sure is that Paul did not return to Jerusalem for about three years. Those three years were spent in Damascus and in Arabia; we're not sure exactly how much time was spent in each place. And when it comes to him being in Arabia we're not sure what he was doing there.

We'll piece together some verses from Acts, Second Corinthians, and Galatians to see what we can about Paul as a baby Christian.

Sounds funny, doesn't it? to call Paul the apostle a baby Christian; but that's what he was.

The best place to start is with a biographical section in Galatians.

Galatians 1:11-12 & 15 -18

11 But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man.

12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.

15 But when it pleased God, who separated me from my mother's womb and called me through His grace,

16 to reveal His Son in me, that I might preach Him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately confer with flesh and blood,

17 nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me; but I went to Arabia, and returned again to Damascus.

18 Then after three years I went up to Jerusalem to see Peter, and remained with him fifteen days.

The main point of these verses is to show that Paul received his commission and message directly from Jesus Christ. He didn't rush to Jerusalem to be taught by, or to be verified by, the original apostles. No, he was just as much an apostle as they, having encountered Jesus Christ personally.

The few words in verse seventeen, "but I went to Arabia," are the only record we have of Paul going there. In his day Arabia referred to everything south and east of Israel.

Based on just these verses in Galatians a tradition has formed that Paul got saved on the road to Damascus, spent a short time there, and then went out into the Arabian desert to spend time alone with Jesus for almost three years. I've heard it presented as a kind of seminary training getting him ready for his mission.

That makes sense to us; that's the way we think. We are big on education, on schooling, on training. We carry over that way of thinking into serving the Lord.

Before I say anything more about that approach to ministry, let's get deeper into what might have really happened in those three years in Arabia.

First of all, there's no mention of it being a solitary stay out in the desert. We hear Arabia and immediately associate it with desert. We assume it was a John the Baptist season in Paul's life.

Truth is that region belonged to a people called the Nabataeans and was ruled by a king named Artetas. There were, then, a lot of Gentiles out there in cities and settlements.

In my research I also learned that there were a lot of Jews from what was called the Hebrew tradition. You might recall from a previous study that the Jews were split into two groups philosophically: Hebrews and Hellenists (or Greeks). The Hebrews were those who resisted the surrounding culture and used Hebrew in their reading and teaching. The Hellenists were progressive and wanted to borrow from the Greek culture.

Do you remember that Paul called himself "a Hebrew of Hebrews?" Certainly it refers to him being really deep into the whole Hebrew worldview. But it might also summarize his time in Arabia as a Hebrew among Hebrews.

If so, we could argue that Paul, at some point, left Damascus and went out into Arabia to preach the Gospel among the Hebrews that had settled there.

Is there any other reason, biblically, to think his time in Arabia was a time of ministry?

Well, we know that Paul immediately began preaching in the synagogues of Damascus.

Acts 9:19-22

19 So when he had received food, he was strengthened. Then Saul spent some days with the disciples at Damascus.

20 Immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.

21 Then all who heard were amazed, and said, "Is this not he who destroyed those who called on this name in Jerusalem, and has come here for that purpose, so that he might bring them bound to the chief priests?"

22 But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this Jesus is the Christ.

Let me read from Acts twenty-six while we are on the subject of Paul preaching immediately in Damascus.

Acts 26:19-20

19 "Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision,

20 but declared first to those in Damascus and in Jerusalem, and throughout all the region of Judea, and then to the Gentiles, that they should repent, turn to God, and do works befitting repentance.

He "declared first to those in Damascus." He "immediately" preached Christ in the synagogues confounding the Jews.

Talking to King Agrippa he related that he was in Damascus then Jerusalem making no mention of Arabia. But we know from Galatians that there was a period of at least three years between Damascus and Jerusalem and that he was in Arabia part of that time. Plus mentioning Damascus was synonymous with Arabia because that's where it was. It would be like me saying I was in Anaheim and it's understood I drove through other cities in Orange County.

For sure we know Paul ministered boldly in Damascus; that at some point he was in Arabia; and that he did not return to Jerusalem for at least three years.

I think Paul preached for a time in Damascus and then took the Gospel out to Arabia, to both the Hebrews in their synagogues and to Gentiles. I think what he said to Agrippa substantiates my claim. He said, "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision..."

What heavenly vision? The appearance of the risen Lord Jesus Christ to Paul on the road to Damascus.

What was Paul to obey? He was to obey the commission Jesus gave him through Ananias as "a chosen vessel... to bear [the name of Jesus] before the Gentiles, and kings, and the children of Israel."

It seems to me that a two or three year retreat in the desert, even to be alone with Jesus, would be disobedient to the heavenly vision.

One author put it like this: "Would Paul, having once seen the Lord and heard His command, turn back from the plow for three years?"

Look at it another way. What would Paul have needed to learn that would take two or three years of solitude? Raised a

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Hebrew, to be a Pharisee, schooled by Gamaliel, he knew the Scriptures backwards and forwards. He spoke all the necessary languages so he didn't need language school. His unique upbringing allowed him to be a Jew among Jews and a Gentile among Gentiles.

Most importantly, Ananias had prayed for Paul, laid his hand on him, to receive the Holy Spirit.

He began immediately to minister. I think we must assume he went on ministering in Arabia - which wasn't just a vast desert wilderness but was filled with Hebrews and Gentiles.

There is an argument that Paul needed time to put everything into perspective, that he was confused in a sense and had to sort everything out.

No! Getting saved doesn't confuse you; it clears up everything. Another potential clue that Paul was ministering in Arabia is that in his writings he describes many persecutions that are not documented in the Book of Acts. For example he says he was flogged at least five times by the Jews (Second Corinthians 11:24) but none of these is recorded. It might be these happened early on, in Arabia.

This is so important. It exposes our default position that a person is not ready to serve the Lord unless and until adequate training has occurred. The Lord told the one hundred and twenty in the Upper Room to wait *only* until the promise of the Holy Spirit coming upon them, baptizing them with boldness for service. The rest was on-the-job training.

It's not by might, nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord.

What am I waiting for? What are you waiting for? Start serving the Lord. If you're already serving Him, listen for new ways of serving that require Him to empower you - ways you cannot accomplish in your own might and power no matter how much training or education you accrue.

Paul returned from Arabia to Damascus and faced persecution.

Second Corinthians 11:32-33

32 In Damascus the governor, under Aretas the king, was guarding the city of the Damascenes with a garrison, desiring to arrest me;

33 but I was let down in a basket through a window in the wall, and escaped from his hands.

Acts 9:23-25

23 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him.

24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the gates day and night, to kill him.

25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.

Isn't it interesting that both the Gentile governor who answered to the Gentile king and the Jews plotted to kill Paul. That the governor was involved might indicate that Paul had made himself known as a troublemaker out in Arabia.

We must return to the understanding, then remained convinced, that we are equipped by the Holy Spirit to boldly do the work of the ministry.

Train as you go because we are hastening the coming of the Lord and there's just no time to waste.